

Maryland Ornithological Society



Maryland / District of Columbia Records Committee Skins Workshop March 29, 2003

1. General

On March 29, 2003, the Maryland/District of Columbia Records Committee (MD/DCRC) held a Skins Workshop at the Division of Birds, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Our hosts were Roger Clapp and Mary Gustafson, both with the US Geological Survey – Biological Resources/Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. Roger is resident at the museum and Mary is with the Bird Banding Lab in Laurel. The committee thanks Roger and Mary for the time they dedicated to our workshop.

2. Committee Attendees

Paul O'Brien (Chair), Phil Davis (Secretary), Jonathan Alderfer, JB Churchill, Barry Cooper, Patty Craig, Matt Hafner, Bonnie Ott, Paul Pisano, Fran Pope, and Bob Ringler.



Figure 1: Committee members at a specimen table. From left to right: Bob Ringler, Barry Cooper, Paul O'Brien, Matt Hafner, Paul Pisano, Jonathan Alderfer, and Bonnie Ott.
All images by Phil Davis.



Figure 2: More members: From left to right: Bonnie Ott, JB Churchill, Fran Pope, and Patty Craig.

3. Skins Studies

We began the workshop after our 9:45 am following security check-in. We assembled in the Bird Division specimen case area on the 6th floor. Our objective was to study specimen skins related to sighting reports that are currently in review or are expected to be reviewed over the next year, or potential identification problems for Maryland and DC. The following cases were examined:

(a) Cave Swallow (*Petrochelidon fulva*) vs. immature Cliff Swallow (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*)

Background: Cave Swallows are now reported annually in the mid-Atlantic area in late autumn. Last fall, Cave Swallows were reported in the area of Point Lookout State Park in St. Mary's County.

Findings: Adult Cliff Swallows showed variation in rump color, but the darker the rump, the darker the throat, which should be obvious in the field. Juvenile Cliff Swallows sometimes had conspicuous splotchy white, but not buff, in the throat, which also should be obvious. Juvenile Cliff Swallows all had dusky marks along with the white blotches on the throat that the Cave Swallows lack. Many also had grayish flanks, but never colored as were the Cave Swallows. In Cave Swallow, the southwest subspecies *P. f. pelodoma* exhibited significant variation in rump color, with corresponding cinnamon nape color intensity. The nominate Caribbean subspecies,

P. f. fulva, has an almost chestnut rump with correspondingly darker throat and flanks, but the nape appeared to be gray, perhaps a useful field mark.



Figure 3: Top: Cave Swallow (female); Bottom: Cliff Swallow (imm female).

(b) Western Wood-Pewee (*Contopus sordidulus*) vs. Eastern Wood-Pewee (*Contopus virens*)

Background: There are two listed USNM specimens of Western Wood-Pewee for Maryland and one for the District of Columbia. These specimens have never been reviewed by the committee given the difficulty of separating the two species from specimens.

These specimens have a long history. The follow relevant extract is from the MD/DCRC Skins Workshop of February 23, 1991, the same day that the AOU Check-List Committee held a meeting at the USNM Bird Division:

WESTERN WOOD-PEWEE (*Contopus sordidulus*): Van Remsen looked at two specimens from Maryland [NMNH #478783, collected by Chan Robbins at Ocean City, MD, 9/13/61; and NMNH #530823, collected by Chan Robbins at Ocean City, MD, 9/1/67] and one from the District of Columbia [NMNH #523922, collected by Paul Bartsch at Washington, DC, 9/18/1899]. He

compared these three specimens with both E. Wood-Pewee (*Contopus virens*) and other W. Wood-Pewees.

Remsen pointed out the greenish cast of E. Wood-Pewee backs, compared to the browner W. Wood-Pewee backs. He noted the tendency for Westerns to have a more extensive dark tip to the lower mandible than Eastern birds. He pointed out juvenile Westerns have narrow buff wingbars and that W. Wood-Pewee show an ochraceous color on the inside bend of the wing. Eastern juveniles in contrast had broader buff wingbars and E. Wood-Pewee show a greyer color on inside bend of the wing.

Based on these comparisons, Van Remsen said he agreed with Allan Phillips that the two Maryland specimens were Western Wood-Pewees. He said the District of Columbia bird was somewhat indeterminate on one character--its wingbars were broader than the Maryland specimens, but still narrower than the average E. Wood-Pewee. He suggested we ask Phillips to look at the DC specimen the next time he is at the museum.

Several years ago, the MD/DCRC heard that a new paper was being prepared "out west" on the subject of separating these two species. Just before the committee's Annual Meeting in February 2003, we located the paper (Hubbard, 2002). Armed with this new information, the committee measured the specimens and applied the keys presented in the paper.



Figure 4: Jonathan Alderfer measures the tail of a Western Wood Pewee.

Findings: Jonathan Alderfer repeated the Hubbard measurements on the MD specimens that Van Remsen had identified as Western based on back color. USNM #478783 [MD/1997-362] did not key cleanly at 100 percent confidence, but comparing the ranges of the measurements, it tended toward Western. USNM #530823 [MD/1997-361] likewise did not key cleanly but was closer to Western measurements. The DC specimen #523922 [DC/1999-032], was apparently re-evaluated since the 1991 Skins Workshop and is now cataloged as Eastern. It indeed keyed to Eastern at the 100 percent confidence level. The complete measurements and ratios for these specimens will be provided by Jonathan and will be added to the MD/DCRC files.

(c) “Sennett's” Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor sennetti*)

Background: A specimen of this western subspecies was located by Marshall Iliff at last year's Skins Workshop during research for his monograph on the subspecies of Maryland (in prep). The specimen was salvaged at Assateague Island on October 4, 1974.



Figure 5: Comparing the Assateague Island, Maryland “Sennett’s” Common Nighthawk (center) to others of the eastern form.

Findings: The MD specimen (a male with head and neck molt) [MD/2002-027, USNM#57535] stood out as paler than most *sennetti* in the collection. But many *sennetti* approached eastern birds in darkness. According to *Identification of North American Birds* by Peter Pyle, the *C. m. sennetti* is large, upperparts medium-pale grayish, without buff tones, and with numerous fine

whitish markings; basal portion of the primaries and secondaries with indistinct or no spots; underparts whitish with narrow dusky bars (~1 mm wide at center of the breast). The specimen was lighter without buff tones; the dusky bars were narrow and extensive. A few Common Nighthawks of the local subspecies had a few narrow bars that approached the width of bars in the "Sennett's" specimen, but were very limited in number. We were not confident of the pattern of the basal area of the primaries and secondaries since these areas could not be fully examined.

(d) Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*)

Background: The gull seen at Conowingo Dam in February 1999 was reported by some as a Slaty-backed Gull [MD/1999-052]. An outside review package was prepared and has been circulated to four experts for opinions on the bird.



Figure 6: Measuring the gray scale of Slaty-backed Gull mantles.

Findings: The MD/DCRC members looked at the USNM collection of Slaty-backed Gulls. Mary Gustafson discussed the skins as she was very familiar with them from the paper she coauthored (Gustafson and Peterjohn, 1994). The mantle color ranged fairly broadly, as described by Howell, with considerable overlap with *graellsii* Lesser Black-backed. There was some variation in the width of the tertial crescent, but it was not possible to examine the secondary trailing edge.

(e) Common Gull (*Larus canus canus*) vs. Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) -- First winter

Background: Some North American birders may not be familiar with the fact that Mew Gull (*Larus canus*) is generally thought to comprise at least three subspecies; (1) *L. c. brachyrhynchus*, the typical North American west coast form, with the little known and hardly used name, "Short-billed Gull"; (2) *L. c. kamchatschensis*, the Asian form called the Kamchatka Gull; and (3) *L. c. canus/heinei*, a European group known as the Common Gull. Common Gulls have been recorded in northeast North America. It is possible that the AOU may split the Mew Gull complex into multiple species. Separation of Common Gull and Ring-billed Gull in first year plumage is a challenge.



Figure 7: Members comparing immature Common Gulls and Ring-billed Gulls.

A first year Common Gull was accepted at Conowingo Dam in January 1994 [MD/1995-033]. Another bird, initially reported as a first year Common Gull was seen at Conowingo Dam in January 1998; however, it was subsequently thought by many observers to be a first year Ring-billed Gull and was never submitted to the committee. More literature has now been published on the relevant identification issues and this bird may yet be submitted to the committee as a Common Gull. The committee may also reevaluate all earlier reports of Common Gull.

Findings: Several Common Gulls showed coverts with dark shaft streaks with occasional cross bars and some had somewhat pointed tips, possibly a function of wear. Some Ring-billed Gulls

had uniform brown, rounded coverts. One Common Gull had extensive black outer web extensions from the tail band up into the center of the tail. All Ring-billed Gulls had flecking in this area, but in some it was restricted but never absent. Likewise, the outer web of the outer rectrices was always flecked on Ring-billed. These limited observations may undermine confidence in the Tove (1993) article criteria.

(f) Brant (*Branta bernicla*)

Background: The taxonomy of Brant is under review and the current complex could be split into multiple (three to four) species. A bird fitting the description of a “Dark-bellied” Brant (*B. b. bernicula*) was recently reported in Delaware and is a candidate to be found in Maryland.



Figure 8: Right to left: Mary Gustafson, Jonathan Alderfer, Bonnie Ott, and Patty Craig comparing Brant subspecies.

Findings: West coast forms (referred to by various names, including “Pacific”, “Black” or “Black-bellied”) Brant (*B. b. nigricans*) are smaller than “Atlantic” or “Pale-bellied” (*B. b. hrota*) forms; but European “Dark-bellied” Brant (*B. b. bernicula*) are larger than the Atlantic form (*B. b. hrota*). Young Dark-bellied birds have pale edges on back and scapular feathers. The neck collar is broken in the front in birds from both sides of the Atlantic (*B. b. hrota* and *B. b. bernicula*), but not in *B. b. nigricans* or the newly described population of “Gray-bellied” Brant that winter in Puget Sound. (The Gray-bellied form has not yet been given a scientific subspecies trinomial name.) Some Atlantic *B. b. hrota* can approach Gray-bellied in belly color, but the neck collar can be used to differentiate them, as it can to differentiate the Black *B. b. nigricans* from the Dark-bellied. Another outstanding feature on Dark-bellied is the bright white flank patch in a very dark surround.

(g) Chukar (*Alectoris chukar*) vs. Rock Partridge (*Alectoris graeca*)



Figure 9: Two Chukars (right), a Rock Partridge (second from left), and a cataloged Rock Partridge that might be mislabeled (left).

Background: A few Chukars have been reported to the committee; however, the species appears to be stocked on local game farms and there is no knowledge or speculation of local breeding in the wild. Jonathan Alderfer noted at the MD/DCRC Annual Meeting that many people generically refer to partridge game birds as “Chukars,” but these reports could also be of the very similar Rock Partridge, which are also known to be raised on game farms. These two species are very similar. To further complicate matters, in Europe, the two species are known to hybridize.

Findings: Chukar has more white (less black) between the eye and bill, and overall is slightly paler with fewer and broader flank bars. The partridge has a trace of gray speckling on the throat above the breast band, but it was so subtle that it might not be noticeable in the field or even in photographs. Partridge calls, however, are known to be very different from Chukar, a four-syllable choppy call rather than a *chuck*.

4. Adjournment

The Workshop ended at approximately 2:45 pm.

Literature Cited:

Gustafson, Mary E. and Peterjohn, Bruce G. 1994. Adult Slaty-backed Gulls: Variability in Mantle Color and Comments on Identification. *Birding* 26(4):243-249.

Hubbard, John P., 2002. Eastern Wood-Pewee Specimens from New Mexico, Plus a Reevaluation of Mensural Criteria for Identifying This Taxon. *Occasional Papers of the Museum of Southwestern Biology*, number 9:1-13.

King, Jon R. and Carey, Geoff. 1999. Slaty-backed Gull hybridization and variation in adult upperparts colour. *Birder's Journal* 8(2):88-93.

Tove, Michael .H. 1993. Field Separation of Ring-billed, Mew, Common & Kamchatka Gulls, *Birding* 25(6); 386-401.

Respectfully submitted,

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